



"Until the Garden Flourishes"
Scripture – Genesis 2:4b-7, 15 John 20:19-23
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Second Sunday of Easter/Earth Day, April 24, 2022

The images are devastating:

An orangutan clings to a trunk that has been stripped bare of branches and leaves. It looks more like a telephone pole than a tree, alone and naked as it is in the clearing. The rest of the rainforest has been mowed down to make room for rows and rows of oil palm, and the orangutan has been left to survey the wreckage of her home.

Out at sea — another wasteland. The reef that had once been a living rainbow has lost its vibrance. Warming waters have bleached the coral, turning the reef from a wonderland teeming with life to a graveyard smothered in seaweed.

And at the poles of our planet, walls of ice crumble and collapse into the ocean. You've seen these images, too. They've become the flashing alarms of a climate in crisis.

David Attenborough does not spare us the distressing details. In his 2020 documentary, *A Life on Our Planet*, he shows viewers how close we've come to ridding the world of wild places.¹ We've cleared half the world's rainforests, cutting down 15 billion trees a year in order to satisfy our demands for lumber and open land. Half the fertile soil on Earth has now been turned to farmland. Humans have overfished the oceans and overdrawn rivers and lakes. In short, our species has overrun the world.

Yes, the images are devastating. The *reality* is devastating. Around the world landscapes once awash in wonder have been laid waste. Where life had once flourished, death now holds sway.

The world we survey is a far cry from Eden — the idyllic garden God planted at the dawn of time. Genesis tells us that our Creator caused every beautiful tree, every fruit-bearing tree to grow out of this fertile land (2:9). And God provided a stream to nourish the plants; it flowed through Eden before dividing into four great rivers — the Tigris and Euphrates among them (2:10-14). The ancient scribe offers a

¹ *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*. Directed by Alastair Fothergill, Jonathan Hughes and Keith Scholey, Netflix, 2020.

vision of the garden as a lush and fruit-laden paradise — the perfect place for life to flourish, the perfect place for humanity to thrive. This garden tells us something about our Maker's expectation and intention; it tells us something about who God is ...

Long before God raised Jesus from the dead, the Creator was already in the business of bringing forth life. It's a truth the church proclaims every year during the first service of Easter. Those of you who joined us last Saturday for the Great Vigil of Easter witnessed the first Creation Story unfold on our chancel, as our children (and a couple of very cooperative parents) illustrated the Maker's first life-giving acts. The Vigil reminds us that God's creative work did not begin as the day was dawning on Easter morn ... but at the dawn of time, when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.

Today's first reading, which comes from the second account of creation in Genesis, also offers a glimpse of the world before the Almighty got to work. It seems it was something of a wasteland: There were no plants. None whatsoever. As far as the eye could see. The text offers two reasons for this: First, God had not yet caused rain to fall upon the earth. Second, there was no one to till the ground, no one to tend whatever would spring forth.

But, as the story goes, it was not a wasteland for long. The Creator reached into dusty ground, formed the first human, and breathed into this being the breath of life. Then God planted the Garden of Eden and placed the creature there, to till it and keep it. Really, the work was more involved than simply turning soil and tending seedlings. When used elsewhere in Scripture, the verbs rendered here as "till" and "keep" mean: to take care of, to serve, to preserve, to protect, to watch over. This is the human's vocation — to ensure the garden flourishes. The Creator's first act is to create a partner — a being formed of dust and filled with divine breath — who will continue the work God has begun, who will continue the work of bringing forth and sustaining life.

Of course, both Scripture and history show how often humans have abandoned our calling. Rather than participating in God's life-giving work, we have abused one another and the earth we call 'home.' The evidence of our misdeeds is all around us. We need only watch David Attenborough's documentary or turn on the nightly news. But, no matter how far we've strayed from Eden — that idyllic garden where creation flourished — God has always remained in the business of bringing forth life ...

Fast forward to another time, another garden — this one with a tomb in the center: A tomb that — on Easter morning — stands open and empty. Its occupant has cast off the grave clothes and stepped into a world burgeoning green with life.

According to the Gospel of John, the resurrected Christ first appears to Mary as she weeps beside that garden tomb. In her grief she does not immediately recognize Jesus. Rather, she mistakes him for the gardener — the person who would have been responsible for tilling the soil and tending the lilies that sprang from it (20:14-15). It's a curious detail — this bit about the gardener. Particularly curious *to me* because this case of mistaken identity is not really a mistake at all. In a broad sense, Jesus *is* a gardener, for he has been sent into the world so that we might have life and have it abundantly. During his

ministry, Jesus showed us what it looks like to thrive in response to a loving touch, what it means to grow in relationship with God. Now, following his resurrection, he will pass this work onto his disciples.

Christ appears to them that very evening. By nightfall, the eleven have heard resurrection reports from Mary Magdalene, who ran rejoicing from the garden to announce that she had seen the Lord. But this news has not had the same effect on the disciples as it had on her. Rather than running throughout the city to share good news, they huddle behind locked doors. As the garden of the world blooms with new life, the disciples cower in a tomb of their own making, the air thick with fear.

But, as the story goes, Jesus does not leave his disciples in a wasteland of grief for long. He appears among them and says, "Peace be with you." Then he shows them his hands and his side. Jesus shows them marks left by nail and spear — wounds wrought by death-dealing hands. At the same time, he shows them what God can do with a bruised and abused body. The One who has always been in the business of bringing forth life has filled this crucified body with breath. The One who summoned all living things from a shapeless void has summoned new life, even when the darkness of despair covered the land.

And — as before — God is determined *not* to do this work alone ... "Peace be with you," Jesus says. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And, then, Christ does something that looks oddly familiar to those of us who've read Genesis: He breathes on them. More precisely, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit *into* them. And, so, he re-creates this community defeated by death into a community defined by life. He commissions fearful followers to throw open the doors and bear witness to the good news of resurrection.

Yes, the God who formed the first human to ensure the garden flourished continues to draw humankind into the work of bringing forth and sustaining life. Not only by tilling and tending, serving and preserving, but also by bearing witness to resurrection hope — to the good news that God still defies the forces of death and invites all creation into the promise of abundant life.

There are many ways to be people of resurrection. There are many ways to use the divine breath stirring within us to proclaim the good news. Following in the footsteps of those first apostles might take us, on any given day, to the streets of our city and beyond to help those most in need of hope ...

By offering welcome or sending aid to people fleeing war-torn lands.

By making sure those in the grip of addiction find appropriate care and support.

By effecting changes that release neighborhoods from the stranglehold of poverty or violence.

By holding the hand of a friend who is entombed by grief until she, too, can rejoice in resurrection.

Yes, there are many ways to be people of resurrection. But — recalling that it is Earth Day Weekend — we might focus on that first human vocation: ensuring that the garden flourishes.

God's good creation is achingly beautiful. It's also devastatingly broken. The bruised and abused body of Mother Earth bears so many wounds: clear-cut forests, scorched plains, plundered and polluted oceans ... But God has been known to work wonders with broken bodies before. After all, God has *always* been in the business of bringing forth and sustaining life. The question is: Are we? Will we be partners in this creative work?

Amidst dire predictions about our planet's future, it's easy to cower in fear. But, if we throw open the doors and step into the world, we'll see that there are already signs pointing to the possibility of resurrection ...

The island nation of Palau, in the South Pacific, relies on coral reefs for its two major industries: fishing and tourism. When fish stocks began to plummet, Palauans responded by restricting fishing practices — banning them completely in certain areas. Soon the protected fish population revived; and, before long, fish were spilling over into areas where fishing was permitted. In the end, the nation's response allowed the reef to recover *and* increased the catch of local fishermen. Creation is flourishing.²

Costa Rica has employed similar methods to preserve the forest. One hundred years ago, over three quarters of the country was covered in rainforest. But uncontrolled logging threatened this ecosystem. By the 1980s, the forest covered only one quarter of the nation's land. The government offered grants to landowners to replant native trees. Now — 25 years later — the forest is recovering. Half the land in Costa Rica has been returned to rainforest. The people are ensuring the garden flourishes.³

And here, at home, we have seen the ecological impact of overuse and abuse. Seventy years ago, the Delaware River was toxic — filled with public and industrial waste. Supposedly, it was so foul that the paint of ships would turn brown as they traveled through the poisoned waters. Parts of the estuary were even considered dead zones, for they were devoid of the oxygen needed to sustain aquatic life. But, after years of care — including enforcing stricter environmental standards — fish are thriving again and bald eagles have returned. We still have work to do; the river is not yet clean enough for fishing or swimming. But we are seeing glimpses of new life. And, if we remain committed to our vocation — our *first* human vocation, this corner of creation will flourish again.⁴

In each of these places, it is human beings — formed of dust and filled with divine breath — who are tilling and tending and serving and preserving ... striving to partner with God in sacred, creative work. And as we labor and watch, we see that God is at work, too — transforming bruised and abused bodies — even that of the earth. For God is still in the business of bringing forth life. God has always been in the business of bringing forth life. May we — People of Resurrection — be in this business, too.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Brief Overview of Water Quality in the DRB," nj.gov (Accessed April 2022). My thanks to the Rev. Miriam Foltz for drawing my attention to this history.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones
Earth Care Prayer 2022

Creator of the cosmos, who from the beginning has been evoking order out of chaos and arousing life out of death, we give thanks for your breathtaking world that dazzles with vast oceans, challenges with immense mountains, and swarms with remarkable creatures. Grant us vision that peers beneath the surface so that we may perceive the vital lessons your creation has to teach us.

As birds serenade with songs of praise and jubilation, may awe and wonder quicken our soul that we may revere the glory and beauty of the earth.

As flowers flaunt their radiant apparel to attract the attention of passersby, may we brandish the elegance of a grateful heart to remind everyone of the precious gifts of mental and physical health.

As roots of trees probe beneath the surface in search of water, may we burrow down into the wisdom of Scripture and tap into the living water that satisfies our deepest thirst.

As rain perks up shriveled plants before they perish, may your love hydrate the barren places of our lives so that hope may be reborn within us.

Loving God, we pray that we may take nothing for granted –

not sunrises or colors,
not breathing or laughter,
not food or friendship,
not affection or kindness.

Remind us, O Lord, that your creation is a gift –

an amazing and beautiful and sacred gift.

May we cherish it, enjoy it, protect it, and preserve it, for we are but temporary stewards of your stunning blue planet. Amen